Lateral

Journal of the Cultural Studies Association

Cringe Theory

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ABSTRACT Cringe theory is a framework intended to make sense of cringe as a cultural and political phenomenon that has come to condition how disability is understood in the contemporary American public imagination. Informed by Silvan Tompkins' approach to affect, cringe theory has two distinct modalities. First, it can be understood as a suprastructure of feeling, a reflex tethered to our affective anatomy, which regulates the relationships between and among our emotions. This modality of cringe theory operates internally, telling us when to cringe, and each of us has our own, even if they do often resemble one another. The second of cringe theory's modalities comes into view as an analytic that traces cringe from the moment of its emergence through the ripple of its repercussions. As an analytic, cringe theory helps us to understand how cringing operates as a culturally conditioned response to the world and as evidence of our affective relations to normative power. By examining both the internal and analytic forms of cringe theory, I show that cringing is a deeply political experience, one that indexes affect as an internalized system of governance by which we come to feel with normativity. Disability is a perfect object for this kind of affective governance, given how often it is used to signify the porous boundary between the purely aesthetic and the resolutely political. By examining a series of recent, popular representations of disability that attempt to elicit cringing from the audience, I argue that we are increasingly encouraged to know disability through our felt or affective perceptions of it. Cringe theory reveals one route through which these affective perceptions are engendered, alongside the affective norms that condition how we are all feeling our way through life.

KEYWORDS aesthetics, affect, disability, representation

Imagine a scene with me: you're having lunch with a new friend at a quiet outdoor cafe. The food is delicious, and your new friend is turning out to be pretty friendly. Midway through the meal, music begins to play from a courtyard adjacent to the cafe. Its volume and tempo are higher than you'd expect to hear at your quiet lunch, but you continue eating. Your friend hears the music too and begins to bob

their head to the beat. They tell you that they love this song and that it always makes them want to dance. You chuckle and sip your tea. Suddenly, your friend stands up from their chair and begins to sway.

“What are you doing?” you ask.

“I told you. This song makes me want to dance.” They move away from the table and into the courtyard. You look around, wondering if others are watching. They are. Your new friend dances to the music. Hips shaking. Feet stepping. Arms waving. You’re in shock.

Several minutes pass, and your lunch partner has not returned to their seat. To the contrary, they’re dancing more intensely with a combination of movements that seem rehearsed, even if poorly executed. From the other side of the courtyard, someone else appears, and they’re holding a boombox that blasts the music you’ve been hearing. They begin to dance as well. But better. The second dancer is trained. Their movements are appropriate to the genre of the music. They have rhythm. And they are visibly confused about this stranger, your friend, who does not seem to have registered their presence.

It dawns on you that your friend has unknowingly joined a street performance. Other diners at the cafe are laughing, some are jeering, and a few begin to film the spectacle. You might’ve been embarrassed for your friend, but the ordeal somehow exceeds embarrassment. There is something about your friend’s unwavering focus, their commitment to their own bad choreography, and the obvious joy on their face that makes your stomach drop. Eventually, your friend acknowledges the other dancer and begins to move more vigorously. A dance-off begins, or at least the pretense of one. For each of the trained dancer’s precise movements, your friend flails wildly. At one point, with both arms thrown into the air, they jump in a circle, landing with a wobble.

A crowd has formed around the courtyard. The newer onlookers don't know what they're watching, but they can't look away. Most of them probably think it's a bit, a comedic routine meant to elicit cheap laughs at your friend's incompetence. A clown show. Frustrated by the mistaken crowd, the trained dancer taps out, retreating to a bottle of water. Your friend, with a proud chin, takes a bow. Everyone cheers. Overwhelmed, you sink into your chair. You cringe.

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Cringe theory is a framework I've been working on for quite some time to help me make sense of the dynamics in scenes like these. I want to understand what constitutes cringing beyond a physiological response, which is to ask about its cultural and social dimensions. What is happening inside the cringer in the moment of their cringe? What is happening to others, especially the cringee or object of the cringer's cringe? Part of my curiosity is linked to the reasons we cringe—what causes cringing—but a much larger part emerges from my interest in the work of cringe, that is, in its effects on the cringer, the cringee, and others who occupy cringe's scene. I want to know what happens after the scene ends, when the friend eventually returns to finish their lunch. How has the dynamic changed, if at all, between the two friends? Was the cringe just a momentary flash of discomfort for one person, or did it perhaps alter something more fundamental to the relation between both people? If the latter is the case, what are the reverberations or aftershocks left in the wake of a cringe? And perhaps most important of all, how might a cringe shape not only these two friends' future interactions but perhaps also shape them as people outside of their isolated relationship? These questions hover around the notion of a cringe entelechy, cringe's storied lifespan and trajectory of dispersion.

I'll admit that my interest in cringe comes from living a life conditioned by it. As a child, I was constantly embarrassing those around me. I said inappropriate things

and asked inappropriate questions. As an adolescent, my body stole focus as the most awkward thing about me. It was like I was wearing a skin suit and never knew how to carry myself, position my arms, or sit comfortably. It came as no surprise, as I've written elsewhere, that my nickname in high school was Awkward John.[1] Throughout college and graduate school, I routinely entertained my friends with stories about the awkward encounters I had with strangers—the inevitable effect of my difficulties navigating small talk and assessing appropriate levels of intimacy. Even now my boyfriend says that my life is like one long episode of a prank television show. I accepted long ago that, for better or worse, I'm pretty damn cringeworthy. Cringe theory is my attempt to understand how being *cringe* has sculpted me.

But not just me alone. One of the driving motivations behind this project is my suspicion that cringe has a special relationship with many disabled people. Over the last two decades, cringe has become a popular representational mode for narrating disability in television and film. Characters on tv shows, such as Andy Dwyer in *Parks and Recreation* (2009–2015), Tracy Jordan in *30 Rock* (2006–2013), and Josh in *Please Like Me* (2013–2016), alongside characters in movies like Andy Stitzer in *The 40-Year-Old Virgin* (2005), Bilo Sagdiyev in *Borat* (2006), and much of the cast of *Champions* (2023), come to mind. These texts narrate disability through what Julia Havas and Maria Sulimma call "cringe aesthetics."[2] Beyond an embodied experience, cringe can also be recognized as "a mode of expression" bridging "the tensions between drama and comedy." To express or represent disability through cringe is to present it in such a way that demands the viewer's discomfort. This discomfort can then be adduced as evidence of the narrative's authenticity or the disabled character's complexity. While I'll return to a longer discussion of cringe's representational power, I want to emphasize here that its growing popularity must be read in the context of increasing visibility among disabled people, particularly autistic and other neurodivergent folks.

A cringe aesthetics forces an affective response to disability's entrance into the public imagination, one that acknowledges our existence without ceding the value of established social norms. Disabled people can be present, but a cringe aesthetics ensures that our presence will be read as decidedly cringeworthy, thereby securing the norms that dictate not only how people behave but also how they feel. Among the goals of this essay is to assess how people come to know disability through their felt or affective perceptions of it. Cringe theory reveals one route through which these particular affective perceptions are engendered, alongside the affective norms that condition how we are all feeling our way through life.

In the pages that follow, I sketch out a working cringe theory. This theory can be described as having two distinct modalities. The first, which I describe in the next section, takes shape as a suprastructure of feeling, a reflex tethered to our affective anatomy, which regulates the relationships between and among our emotions. This modality of cringe theory operates internally, telling us when to cringe, and each of us has our own, even if they do often bare striking resemblance to one another. The second of cringe theory's modalities, which occupies the latter half of the essay, comes into view as an analytic that helps us to understand how cringing operates as a conditioned response to the world and as evidence of our affective relations to normative power. This modality invites us to critically examine cultural texts, including several that I discuss below, that invoke cringeworthiness or seek to evoke cringing from the audience. By attending to both the internal and analytic forms of cringe theory, I hope to show that cringing is a deeply political experience, one that indexes affect not only as a disciplinary tool to maintain social status quos but also as an internalized system of governance by which we come to *feel with* normativity. Sometimes, as I'll argue, cringing is elicited to give people the satisfaction of political engagement without demanding any material action from them. My intention is not to problematize cringe but to offer suggestions for how to navigate

cringeworthiness, both our own and others', in a way that is conscious of the conditions of its production and attentive to the distribution of its effects.

One final prefatory note is that I chose to open with a scene about someone dancing in public because it's a variation on a scene I've lived. I've been the person who heard a song they liked and who left their lunch to dance in public. I have a family who watched in horror as their teenage child grooved, who sunk into their chairs as they realized I had unintentionally inserted myself into a performance. I have a father who decided to film his dancing child with his phone. I have a family who continues to share the video over a decade later, trading it back and forth in group chats to laugh about. I know the video by heart, every move I made, every laugh from the crowd, every groan from my family. I've come to recognize my cringeworthiness through the eyes of cringers, and I've watched as the video's ongoing circulation has become both a product and producer—a living testament—of my queer neurological difference. If there's one thing I've learned by being the perpetual cringe object, it's that people trust you more when you're the cringer than when you're the cringee. I figured it would be safer to open this essay with a bit of role-play, a little masquerade of neuronormative affectivity, to gain your trust that I know what cringe is, even and perhaps especially because cringe is me.

Cringe Theory: Part I

To put it concisely, I understand cringing as a physiological response to an affective crisis, one typically generated by a disjuncture we perceive between our own feelings toward an object and others' feelings toward the same object. For me, cringing is not reducible or bound to a singular affect, whether embarrassment, shame, disgust, fear, or any other, but is instead the body's reaction when the norms on which we rely to tell us how to feel are called into question. To be sure, cringing is an affective experience, fundamentally

prediscursive and indeterminable, and yet it is not an affect itself. Cringing is a mechanism of our *affective infrastructure*, the phrase I use to capture the interplay among multiple affective norms at work within and across all of us. This mechanism is set into motion by our perception of affective fracturing or when we realize that someone with whom we expected to share feeling does not after all feel the way we do. Cringing occurs not necessarily when someone violates a social norm but when a person's feelings toward such a violation fail to align with our own.

Structures of Affect

My affective approach to cringe emerges in the lineage of Silvan Tompkins, whose psychoanalytic approach to affect theory preceded its institutionalization as an academic field. Though Tompkins has long been recognized as an early and important figure in the study of affect, I am keen to recover elements of his work that generally go under-examined. Namely, I am drawn to the rich language that Tompkins offers to articulate affective socialization, helping us recognize how a person's intimate feelings are contoured by the world around them. Part of this language is the phrase "affect theory" itself, which Tompkins understood an embodied structure of feeling functioning as "a simplified and powerful summary of a larger set of affect experiences."[3] Each of us, according to Tompkins, has a range of internal theories—or rubrics of feeling—that correspond with specific affects, such as a shame theory, distress theory, and fear theory. These theories correspond with not only what we actually feel in a given moment but also the rules we have learned about what we are supposed to feel. "Shame theory," Tompkins offers as an example, "is one such source of great power and generality in activating shame, in alerting the individual to the possibility or imminence of shame and in providing standardized strategies for minimizing shame."[4] Our experience of shame or any number of feelings is shaped by a combination of biological and cultural forces. Feeling, like most involuntary responses, is

informed by an archive of impressions between a unique bodymind and its social context.

While Tompkins uses the language of affect theory to refer to both "affect in general" and individual affects, I find it helpful to substitute the term *affective infrastructure* when addressing the relations across multiple affect theories.[5] In other words, a person's affective infrastructure speaks to the corpus of affect theories that each of us has developed to regulate our emotions. The term affective infrastructure also brings to mind affect's social dimension: that what we feel is conditioned by what others feel. Teresa Brennan refers to this social dimension as the "transmission of affect" or the way that "affects do not only arise within a particular person but also come from without."[6] Our affective infrastructure is made up of negotiations among the affects that surround us and our extant affect theories. What we feel is perpetually under revision by the feelings of others.

By proposing that cringe is a mechanism of our affective infrastructure, I am suggesting that cringe is a social phenomenon not only between individual pairs of cringers and cringees but also across all of us implicated in the systems of norms that govern our feelings. Cringe is less about our feelings toward others' actions than about our feelings toward feelings, both our own and those of others. This distinction is important because it allows us to differentiate cringe from other culturally conditioned forms of discomfort, such as awkwardness, anxiety, or dread. These other forms are typically elicited by an external object, such as a person, behavior, or situation; whereas, cringe is unusual in that it is prompted not by a conventional object but by our perception of another person's feelings toward that object. Affect itself becomes cringe's object. Cringing turns on the lights, however briefly or intensely, to reveal the socialized machinery controlling not what we feel, *per se*, but the structures of feeling that condition what we have come to regard as appropriate feeling or even natural feeling.

These normative feelings are the ones we expect and hope to share with those around us. By feeling the same feelings as others, we build social bonds through identification, in turn strengthening our affective infrastructures. I see myself in you because I feel myself in you, and such seeing and feeling of the other invites reciprocal seeing and feeling, meeting our desire to be seen and felt. To share affectivity can be a precondition for identification, for the kinds of relationality built on perceived similarities. And we take these similarities as reassurance that we're doing something right, that we're feeling something right. There's a rush that comes with realizing your feelings toward an object are shared with someone else. The excitement of learning that another person at the faculty luncheon watches *The Real Housewives of Atlanta*, the dark pleasure of direct messaging with someone online when you share a mutual nemesis, the hilarity of making eye contact with your friend in the virtual department meeting when the resident contrarian has predictably derailed the conversation. We cherish these moments of affective alignment because they recursively suggest that our own affects are properly aligned.

Many of us seek these moments out. It's why we drop hints into conversation about our favorite television shows, why we casually ask new acquaintances their thoughts on someone we dislike, and why we risk eye contact, a brush of hands, or a quick rub of thighs with strangers. These aren't merely rhetorical or physical gestures. They're affective ones, too—attempts at forging what Brennan calls a "line of the heart" that binds us into felt communion and that, through such binding, reinforces our confidence that we are feeling the world as we're meant to feel it.[7] Of course, efforts to establish shared feelings are not always possible. Sometimes we don't have much in common with the people around us. We all have people in our lives with whom we don't expect to identify. In these cases, we know we don't share feelings, and while our affectivities may still influence one another, they don't draw us together into that intimate web of mutual sensibilities. Not everyone likes everyone else, not everyone is friends, not everyone maintains resonant affective infrastructures.

Then there are those especially painful moments that fall between felt communion and non-identification. These are moments when we expect to share feelings but are left wanting, or when we do share feelings that are suddenly wrested apart. When your dinner date burps loudly in an upscale restaurant, when your friend sends you a terrible poem that they've written, when your mother posts a thirst trap on Facebook. In these flashes of affective fracturing, what we might imagine as frustrated, regrettable, or otherwise tested identifications, we are caught in fixed proximity to someone with whom we suddenly wish we didn't share or expect to share feelings at all. Affective fracturing generates an alternative rush to the one that corresponds with desired identification; it's a rush charged by the panic that you're feeling on your own, that your feelings may be wrong, and that the affective infrastructure modulating your feelings may be ill-equipped. This rush, Laura Kipnis describes, "overwhelms, registering as an uncomfortable, even visceral excess."[8] A cringe is such excess: nausea, clenched fists, a grimace, and wet palms—all symptomatic of embodyminded overload. When our feelings toward an object—the burp, the poem, the thirst trap—are called into question through troubled identification, we are faced not only with the fact of affective difference but also with the wound left behind by the affective intimacy that once was.

It is the impact of this carnage, the heartbreak of separation, that captures cringe's essence. Jason Middleton, in his book on cringe comedy, refers to cringe as "intrusions of the real in unexpected and unmanageable forms."[9] Unexpectedness is in part what makes the real so unmanageable. To have shared feelings suddenly disrupted is to have not only an individual affect theory interrogated (e.g., "Why am I feeling shame right now when you're not?") but also your entire affective infrastructure pulled into focus, revealing the competing structures of feelings that mitigate our interaction with the world. A barrage of questions intrude on the horizon of our consciousness: Is there something wrong with how I'm feeling? How do I know what I'm supposed to feel? And why don't I already know it? It's an affective crisis—a crisis of our feelings that threatens to

expose just how conditioned our feelings are. Cringing is a self-protective measure, an attempt to thwart the affective crisis before it evolves into a crisis of conscience and to defend the integrity of our affective infrastructure from our own disillusion. To lose faith in our affective infrastructure would be to admit its existence: the catastrophe of infrastructural failure is always a testament to our reliance on its power. It's scary to think about the conditioning of our feelings, especially when those feelings have just been rejected from a social bond. Cringing quells the fear, projecting the uncertainty onto someone else. A balm for the terror of a broken heart.

The Social Life of Cringe

I should clarify that I am speaking metaphorically—a kind of autistic hyperbole. Cringing doesn't feel much like fear or a broken heart. Cringing feels like *eww*, like *ick*, like *make it stop*. It feels like intensity. But metaphors are helpful because the feeling of intensity is inarticulable in the moment of the cringe, when the force of estrangement rips us from the security of affective relation and leaves us to feel, by ourselves, the world as it is, barefaced. Here we encounter Middleton's unmanageability of the real: when there is no one else and no more rules of engagement. It's just you and your feelings against a vast sea of randomness. This randomness produces what Adam Kotsko calls "radical awkwardness."[10] As opposed to the awkwardness that arises every time someone violates a social norm, radical awkwardness refers to the discomfort of navigating a clash between norms or "when there doesn't seem to be any norm governing a situation at all."[11] Cringing is a response to this normlessness, to the frenzy of emotion that follows not knowing how to feel. It is "a notable instability of feeling," according to Katja Kanzler, that signals a psychic grasping for direction.[12] Cringing is a substitute for that nonexistent direction. By locating cringeworthiness in an external object, we convince ourselves that cringeworthiness is another person's responsibility and

that we are merely its perceivers. This is a lie we tell ourselves: that cringe isn't about our own feelings but about someone else's doings.

We imagine that we're cringing because of another person's behavior and how that behavior reflects on them as an individual. *If only they would behave differently*—not burp in public, write better poems, avoid posting thirst traps—*they wouldn't be so cringeworthy*, or so we think. But among the key interventions of cringe theory is that a person doesn't become cringeworthy because of what they do but because of how others perceive that person's feelings toward their doing. We don't cringe at the object itself but at the conflicting affects projected onto the object. Even if a person is the object—someone begins dancing alone in public—we don't cringe at the person but at the sincerity we perceive in their movement, in the pleasure they take in their steps, in the confidence with which they wield their awkwardness. The cringe emerges in the moment of recognition, not that there is more than one way to be in the world but at the compounded affective tension arising from multiple ways to feel or not feel toward that being. Your date enjoys the burp, your friend is proud of the poem, your mom is excited by the photo. We all rely heavily on sharing feelings with others to reassure us of our own feelings. When someone fails to feel like we do, we are left second-guessing how to feel. Cringing transmogrifies this self-doubt into an assumption that the cringee lacks the knowledge that would presumably realign their feelings with our own. If they knew different, they'd feel different. If they felt different, they'd do different. If they did different, they'd be different.

But as someone who has long lived beneath cringe's banner, I can assure you that being cringeworthy isn't entirely up to the cringe. Cringeworthiness is accumulative. It builds over time, changing in texture and tenor, but nevertheless thickening with each successive cringe. The more I'm cringed at, the more I'm cringed at. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick suggests that shame leaves "a record of the highly individual histories by which the fleeting emotion . . . has instituted far more durable, structural changes."[13] To imagine the bodymind as a record of affect

helps to dial in on how each affective interaction shapes us. While cringe is not an affect itself, it is affective in the sense that it too leaves impressions, altering the affective infrastructures that guide our future feelings. Each cringe conditions every future cringe, not only for the cringer but for all of us. Who and what we collectively consider cringeworthy is reinforced or contested with every individual cringe. And that reinforcement or contestation, that infrastructural alteration, influences how we perceive and respond to others' feelings.

Over time, these alterations expand the purview of our affective infrastructures. Tompkins proposes that an affect theory's relative strength can be measured by its breadth of application. Whereas a weak affect theory "accounts for a very restricted domain," such that it is only activated in specific circumstances, stronger theories are more capacious and responsive to "other potential sources" of the affect in question.[14] An affect theory grows stronger as an individual is faced with new circumstances that demand affective interpretation. Our affective infrastructure also grows stronger each time it is placed under pressure; it too evolves to accommodate our demand for instruction. When we cringe, our affective infrastructure is adjusted, however marginally, to take stock of the context: Who are we cringing at? What are they doing? How are they feeling toward that doing? And in what ways do their feelings depart from or contradict our own? The answers to these questions prepare us not only to better navigate future cringes but also to predict them before they occur. Affect theories, Tompkins suggests, can be used to "anticipate and avoid the experience of affect," particularly those affects that are undesirable.[15] Similarly, our affective infrastructures strengthen with each cringe, prompting us to anticipate cringeworthiness more frequently in an effort to prevent the discomfort that cringing brings.

Anticipating cringeworthiness often takes shape as non-identification. It's important to recall that cringing requires first and foremost the intimacy of shared feeling. Xine Yao refers to this intimacy as sympathy: "the fundamental mode of

apprehending affects, feelings, and emotions—and deeming them legitimate."[16] Without that sympathy, there can be no affective fracturing, only affective difference. If we don't care about how someone feels, or if we don't expect to share feeling with them, then there will be no affective grounds for us to cringe. Without sympathy, affective tension can be dismissed as unthreatening to our affective infrastructure and instead attributed to a fabulation of racial or disability difference.[17] It's notable, for example, that Kotsko uses people with "certain cognitive disabilities" as an example of a group that is "awkward by nature."[18] Presuming natural or inherent awkwardness in a person is not unlike presuming their cringeworthiness: both presumptions are proactive self-defense mechanisms intended to forestall shared feeling. In the minds of many nondisabled people, visible disability—especially mental disability—indexes a fundamental human difference that makes identification impossible or undesirable. It is more comfortable for them to deny the possibility of intimacy and identification straightaway than to risk the disappointment of that shared feeling if it is severed down the line. Identification through sympathy demands a degree of vulnerability, so our affective infrastructures erect an internal cringe theory to regulate that vulnerability, monitoring which people and in what contexts are safe enough to expect shared feeling.

I think about my family circulating the video of me and the pleasure they continue to elicit from it. When the video was first recorded, they were locked into cringe, overwhelmed by affective fracturing. But in the years since, I've come out with new identities, received several diagnoses, and settled into adulthood with an assuredness that I lacked as a queer autistic teenager. Now my family no longer expects to share feeling with me. They no longer expect to identify with me or to feel their feelings in my own. Quite the opposite from causing a crisis, their rewatching of that video only reinforces their affective infrastructures. It affirms that they are right not to share feeling with me. And that affirmation is itself a shared feeling for them, one that binds them closer through my continued affective abjection. They've learned to accommodate my feelings as symptomatic

of a perpetually externalized object. Their cringe theories having blocked me out, my family is free to watch me dance and think to themselves that I was never like them at all.

Cringe Theory: Part II

As I mentioned in the introduction, I don't want this essay to be all about me. I hope that the anecdotes I share about my relationship to cringe can be understood in the context of a larger argument about how cringe operates as a mode of social organization. I hope, too, that my family's evolving relationship to my affectivity can serve as a useful transition into cringe theory's second modality as an analytic. In the previous section, we approached cringe theory as a mechanism of our affective infrastructures, where it operates as an internal, involuntary process that helps us to navigate affective fracturing. In this section, I want to pivot us toward cringe theory as a mode of analysis, whereby it aids the mapping of our affective infrastructures by zeroing in on points of rupture that mark the limits of our extant affect theories. Attending to scenes of cringe reveals the fault lines in our affective infrastructures, where the norms shaping our individuated affect theories fall short. Cringe theory, as such, might be something that we not only feel with but also think with, illuminating both *what* we cringe at and *why*. It's here that cringing comes into focus as an affective heuristic: a grammar through which forms of difference, including disability, can become known through feeling.

Thinking with/through Cringe

To pilot the transition from cringe theory-as-mechanism toward cringe theory-as-methodology, it's useful to shift focus from the cringer to the cringee. In the moment of a cringe, the cringer projects cringeworthiness onto the cringee. Above, we learned that cringeworthiness does not emerge out of a person or their

behavior but out of affective tension between people—one of whom cringes in a desperate attempt to salvage the integrity of their affective infrastructure. It is fair to say that cringing tells us less about the person we're cringing at than about ourselves and our own affectivity. Nevertheless, the *effects* of a cringe are bilateral; they alter the affective infrastructures of both the cringer and the cringee. For the cringer, each cringe modifies their internal cringe theory, which consequently shapes their future cringes. For the cringee, being cringed at may not change their cringe theory (depending on their awareness of others' cringes), but it does change the likelihood that they'll be cringed at again. Borrowing from Sara Ahmed's work on emotion, we can recognize cringe as a sticky affective phenomenon. When a person is cringed at or regarded as cringeworthy, cringiness sticks to them and, in turn, polarizes them to attract future cringes.

Despite that cringes can be brief, their impressions are lasting, particularly because of how they transform the significations appending a person's affectivity. Stickiness, for Ahmed, entails "a chain of effects" that include "the histories of contact between bodies, objects, and signs."[19] To describe cringe as sticky is to acknowledge that affects can be objects and that people's feelings can amass signs based on how others' perceive them. Like disgust, cringing serves a performative function that Ahmed explains as "both 'lag[ging] behind' the object from which it recoils, and generat[ing] the object in the very event of recoiling."[20] To be cringed at is not merely to be recognized as cringeworthy but to be made cringeworthy. Once made, it can be difficult to be unmade or to be made differently. Similar to how our affective infrastructures are built up through the reinforcement of individual affect theories—themselves a product of accumulating affective norms—so too do the signs attached to our feelings accrue over time. Elsewhere, I've described this accrual as an effect of our rhetorical energy, the constellation of discourses that swarms our bodyminds.[21] Our feelings, too, can take on discursive meaning through affective interactions, such as cringes.

Cringing affixes meaning to another's feelings, transforming that other in the process and contouring how their feelings may or may not come to mean in the future. Again like disgust, cringing "can generate effects by 'binding' signs to bodies as a binding that 'blocks' new meanings."[22] Given the anticipatory nature of our affective infrastructures, being cringed at can abrogate the possibility of sharing feeling with others in the future. Being perceived as cringeworthy obstructs affective intimacy and forecloses the potential for identification. Cringing is a way of feeling otherness and of othering through feeling. To be cringed at is not only to have your feelings othered but also to become an other through the signs appended to your feelings.

It is worth highlighting the disciplinary power that cringing wields. Despite that cringing can occasionally be experienced by the cringer as a jarring free from the social order—a reaction to radical awkwardness—cringing over time, through repetition, takes on a more prescriptive function. This function no longer opens the bodymind to new ways of feeling but instead closes off the bodymind, making new ways of feeling seem undesirable or even impossible. This contradiction between cringe's enlivening felt experience and its normativizing effects is what makes cringe theory a useful methodological tool. To think with cringe theory is to identify cringe as a moment in which affective norms are created. Cringing simultaneously confronts the absence of a norm and renders someone else non-normative, the dark matter from which norms are wrought. Cringing thus invites a rare glimpse into the inception of a new norm: when deviance has been established prior to the formation of its respectable antithesis. Cringe theory asks us to center cringe and other responses to affective fracturing in our consideration of how normativity is engendered.

Aestheticizing Cringe

Increasingly, this engendering takes place in the context of a cringe aesthetic, which refers to the stylization of cringe as a genre of representation. According to

Havas and Sulimma, cringe aesthetics "overtly appeal to contemporary political sensibilities" because they manage to give the illusion of character complexity with the levity of comedy.[23] A cringe aesthetic intentionally elicits cringing from the audience to generate the feeling of political community without the weight of political responsibility. By "exposing central characters' personal faults or their social environments' shortcomings *as political issues*," a cringe aesthetic leads the audience into a sanctioned cringe that—through participating, through cringing—affirms the alignment of the audience's affective infrastructures.[24] This is a kind of cringe designed to reinforce the audience's ways of knowing and feeling toward the world. The genre solicits communal cringing to build affective intimacy through the shared critique of a character or environment, not unlike how my family bonds through their shared laughter at the video of me. It is a mediated form of cringe that curates a narrative to replicate the intensity of an affective crisis without any risk of vulnerability. Experiencing an affective fracture with a character is different than experiencing it with another person. We know the character isn't real, and we take comfort in its irreality. A cringe aesthetic is not unlike the genre of horror: it allows the audience to take their internal cringe theory for a test run without needing to worry about any tectonic shifts to their affective infrastructure or getting bludgeoned by a serial killer.

Disability is a perfect subject for this kind of affective experiment, given how often it is used to signify the porous boundary between the purely aesthetic and the resolutely political. In *Aesthetic Nervousness*, Ato Quayson argues that "the representation of disability oscillates uneasily between the aesthetic and the ethical domains," so that the appearance of disability almost always indexes "an ethical dimension."[25] While it is useful to differentiate between politics and ethics, one of the functions of a cringe aesthetic is to blur their boundary, encouraging people to feel righteous about their involuntary response toward the cringeworthy object, which itself can symbolize a political issue. Representations of disability facilitate this blurring of the political, ethical, and aesthetic through the anxiety they cause audiences, who are predisposed to *read into* disability some hidden or

deeper meaning. Nondisabled people in particular approach disability as an inherently ambivalent object, whether real or represented, that slips back and forth across "a pure process of abstraction" and "a set of material conditions."[26] A character's disability consumes them and yet signifies something beyond them, typically a "something" that assists nondisabled people in thinking or feeling toward themselves. A cringe aesthetic channels this ambivalence through an affective crisis in an attempt to trigger, but not threaten, the cringer's affective infrastructure, thereby fortifying their existing feelings toward the world. As a cringe object, the figure of disability reassures audiences that their cringing is an affective symbol of an admirable ethicopolitics.

There are many forms that a disability-centered cringe aesthetic might take. Often, it appears as cringe comedy, a genre in which the audience is meant to find humor in the affective tension produced between a disabled character and other characters or their surroundings. One example that I think about often is the character Kevin Malone from the American version of *The Office* (2005–2013). Throughout the series, Kevin's incompetence, unrestrained appetite, and lack of self-awareness routinely produce friction between him and other characters. This friction arguably comes to a head when an employee from HR, Holly, refers to Kevin as "mentally challenged" while defending him from another coworker's ableist bullying.[27] Kevin interrupts her, asking, "Do you think that I'm retarded?" Immediately, the tone of the scene shifts as the audience is led to believe that Holly has made a terrible mistake. The coworker who had been bullying Kevin, calling him a "dummy" and an "idiot," reprimands Holly by referring to her comment as "very offensive." In this moment, the specter of intellectual disability generates an affective crisis for almost everyone in the scene: Kevin for being called "mentally challenged," Holly for being corrected, and the onlooking coworkers for bearing witness to the tension between Kevin and Holly—one of whom gasps and places a hand over his mouth. The audience, too, is expected to cringe at the fallout from Holly's overconfidence. Though we are not cringing at Kevin directly, it is nevertheless the case that his character materializes cultural

assumptions about disability, and it is ultimately his contested disability that provides the affective conditions for cringing to occur.

Coincidentally, the cringing directed at Holly's blunder covers over the ableist bullying that precipitated her intervention on Kevin's behalf. The ethicopolitical stance affirmed by the scene is that it is far worse a crime to incorrectly suspect that a person is disabled than to launch ableist insults at people we don't like. We aren't meant to cringe in solidarity with Kevin when he is being bullied, but we do cringe in solidarity with him after he has been mislabeled. This distinction speaks to with whom we are expected to share feeling. Initially, we share it with Holly, who presents herself as a kind and rational defender of the weak. It is only after Kevin has been resignified as nondisabled that we are given the opportunity to establish affective intimacy with him, which is to say that it is only in the absence of disability that we are expected to share feeling, to identify. The revelation that Kevin is not "mentally challenged" lays the groundwork for Holly's cringeworthiness not only because she was mistaken about his disability status but also because Kevin's aggravation becomes more affectively relatable.

Affective relatability, or the perceived capacity to share feeling, marks a central feature of the cringe aesthetics of disability. For as often as disability is instrumentalized to make audience's cringe, it is rarely a cringe on behalf of a disabled person or character. Quite the opposite, when disability is present, cringe is generally invoked to erect affective distance between the audience and the disabled party. In these cases, the audience cringes because they cannot imagine feeling how a disabled person feels; disability exists beyond the limits of their affective infrastructure. This discomfort-wrought-by-the-unimaginable is particularly palpable in what Linda M. Hess calls "cringe tragedy," a genre of narrative in which "awkward moments are channeled into sympathy."[28] As opposed to cringe comedy, cringe tragedy provokes somber cringing, the kind that feeds righteous indignation. While Hess is optimistic about cringe tragedy's potential to destigmatize disability and raise awareness about systemic ableism, I

am more accustomed to tragic narratives that condescend and perpetuate stereotypes about the undesirability or unliveability of disability.

One example that comes to mind is *Atypical*, a Netflix original series about a white autistic teenage boy, Sam Gardner, and his family. The show has been thoroughly criticized by autistic people,[29] but its initial popularity is a testament to non-autistic audiences' interest in cringe tragic representations of disability. During the first season, one of the primary plot lines follows Sam's unrequited romantic interest in his therapist. In the second episode, Sam's father, Doug, mistakenly drives Sam to the therapist's house, thinking that he is taking his son to woo a teenage girl.[30] Rather than knocking at the front door, Sam opens a window on the front porch, effectively breaking into his therapist's home. Doug watches from the car in horror, whispering, "No, no, no, no," before racing out to find his son standing in the middle of his therapist's living room. The entire scene is painful to watch, and the cringe that ensues is directly tethered to the affective tension between Sam and his father. While Sam's behavior is itself a violation of social norms that produces awkwardness, it is Sam's obliviousness to that violation that makes the scene cringeworthy. Despite his confusion about where he was driving, Doug is still the most affectively relatable character. He is the one who expresses surprise at his son's actions and fears them getting caught. The audience is never meant to share feeling with Sam; we are meant to share feeling with the father about Sam.

It's through this shared feeling with Doug that we come to know Sam as a character. Sam's autism is made legible not only through his behavior but also through the feelings of other characters, which we in turn are meant to adopt. When I talk about the stickiness of cringe, this is what I'm referring to: cringeworthiness is appended to Sam through his father's feelings, feelings that we are meant to share, and by sharing them, we confirm their rightness. By sharing Doug's feelings, we not only accept the assessment of Sam as a cringeworthy character but also adhere cringeworthiness to Sam's autism. It's

here that the boundary between the representation of disability and the perceived experience of disability grows thin. "Because disability in the real world already incites interpretation," Quayson writes, "literary representations of disability . . . are refractions of that reality, with varying emphases of both an aesthetic and ethical kind."[31] A cringe aesthetic can imbue preconceived attitudes toward disability with an ethical valence, roping a common stereotype into a broader political agenda.

The above scene from *Atypical* confirms stereotypes that autistic people do not respect others' boundaries and that they are predisposed to illicit sexual desire. By narrating these stereotypes in the context of Sam breaking and entering into his therapist's home, *Atypical* frames autistic people as potential threats to the sexual safety of others. The scene dramatically escalates the stakes of autistic stereotypes, transforming them from common sentiments into political issues. The cringe that it attempts to elicit from the audience is meant to confirm our own felt agreement with the escalation: that we not only believe the stereotypes but also feel the urgency with which they demand our attention. It is relevant that *Atypical* was informally endorsed by Autism Speaks, a hate group dedicated to eradicating autism, which promoted the show on its Twitter page and blog.[32] Such an endorsement clarifies that any sympathy *Atypical* fosters toward Sam or autistic people is a sympathy laced with disgust. It is to say, "I feel bad for you," which is another way of saying, "Your existence makes me feel bad," or "I'd feel better if you didn't exist."

Across cringe comedies and tragedies, a cringe aesthetic papers over the gap between the intensity of an audience's feelings about disability and their typically limited knowledge of the experience of disability. When disability is invoked to condition or elicit a cringe, the audience is invited to recognize their cringing as felt confirmation of what they already believe about disability, namely that it exists beyond the realm of identification. A cringe aesthetic of disability runs on a circular logic, wherein disability comes to be known through feeling because it is

imagined to be unknowable, and yet it is imagined to be unknowable because it is assumed to be affectively impenetrable. Known to be unknown through the feeling of unshared feeling. What I've been proposing as cringe theory helps us to identify the stitching between feeling and knowing, along with how that stitching enables the politicization of knowledge. Feeling as an ethical intensifier.

A Cringeworthy Politics

While a cringe aesthetic often harnesses feelings toward disability in ways that are used against the interests of disabled people, the purpose of cringe theory is not merely to problematize cringe aesthetics, let alone cringing. Cringing is an involuntary response, not something we can consciously control. Likewise, a cringe aesthetics is merely a response to what the writer, creator, or artist perceives as the affective infrastructure of their intended audience. Cringing isn't ableist, even if cringe theory illuminates how our feelings have been shaped by ableism. A cringe aesthetics can be ableist, but it doesn't have to be. Cringe theory exposes cringe's contingencies. It peels back the layers of our response to an affective crisis to identify which of our feelings have been confirmed, which have been contested, and which—through these competing processes of confirmation and contestation—have been generated entirely anew.

Having said this, I remain skeptical about attempts to reclaim a cringe aesthetic for anti-ableist or other liberatory purposes. As the popularity of cringe aesthetics rises, so too does the appropriation of cringe as an educational tool for introducing normative audiences to their own cringeworthiness. Sharon Tran describes this appropriation as "redirect[ing] the cringe, a bodily gesture of turning inward, toward external systems of inequality."[33] To redirect a cringe is to suggest that affective tension is produced not by the person who violates a social norm but by the expectation that it be followed. The strategy attempts to produce a self-directed affective fracture in which recognizing yourself in the image of a cringeworthy other forces you to acknowledge your own cringeworthiness. In the

context of disability, redirecting the cringe exposes the quotidian ableism that makes living a normative life impossible for many disabled people.[34] It is meant to encourage nondisabled audiences to take stock of how abled norms are incompatible with disability, thereby revealing the norms themselves as inadequate and the people who cling to them as cringeworthy. In contrast to the typical power structure erected by a cringe aesthetics—in which, per Havas and Sulimma, "we do not cringe *with* but *at* characters"—redirecting the cringe is intended to provoke reflexivity.[35] As much as I admire this goal, I am left troubled by how strategic redirection tends to presume a normative audience, effectively recentering a normative affective infrastructure.

There is an opportunity lost when a mode of expression or representation is reclaimed only to still prioritize the feelings of a dominant group, such as nondisabled people. My intention here is to interrogate the concessions made whenever anti-ableism takes shape as a pedagogical intervention. Teaching and learning are good, but in the context of a cringe aesthetic—where feeling and knowledge are entwined—I worry when normative audiences come to believe that cringing is a suitable substitute for the more challenging work of reconciliation. I'm thinking of the masochistic impulse that insulates people from acknowledging their relation to power: when being scolded or made to feel shame somehow releases the pressure of holding oneself accountable for their actions. While a cringe aesthetics is not necessarily scolding, and though cringing itself is decidedly not reducible to shame, there is something similar about their felt intensity.

In a neoliberal context, where consumption takes precedence over action, the decision to allow oneself to be affectively engaged can be mistaken for an act of justice. Activism can be misconstrued as the content you stream, the social media accounts you follow, or the information you absorb. When a person feels the right feelings toward the right objects, it is assumed that they know the right knowledge—itself a replacement for doing the right thing. A cringe aesthetic that

cedes a normative affective infrastructure, that operates according to the affective rubric of an audience aspiring to normativity, risks shoring up the mythos of such affective activism. A cringe aesthetics that fails to deprioritize the feelings subtending ableism can only ever operate in relation to ableist feelings. I suppose I'm not satisfied with that relation.

I'll give an example of this kind of failure. In 2014, Scope—a self-described "disability equality charity" in the United Kingdom—launched a campaign entitled "End the Awkward."[36] According to Scope's website, the campaign is "aimed at helping people feel more comfortable about disability" by "us[ing] humor to get people thinking differently."[37] We can notice immediately that the audience targeted by the campaign is comprised entirely by nondisabled people or those who "feel awkward around disabled people."[38] The campaign prioritizes affective infrastructures that regard disability as inherently cringeworthy. In 2015, Scope released six short films as part of a "What Not To Do . . ." series, which depicts nondisabled people as cringeworthy when they interact with disabled folks. Each film is structured as a reaction video, where a white disabled journalist, Alex Brooker, cringes at a prerecorded hidden-camera scene. In the scene, two paid actors—one disabled, one nondisabled—interact among unsuspecting strangers. The nondisabled actor fumbles through the interaction, saying and doing awkward things that cause people nearby to cringe.

In one film, the actors stage a pickup scene at a club, where a hearing man attempts to invent signs to communicate with a Deaf woman.[39] In another film, a sighted woman dips her Blind date's hands in his food.[40] In still another film, a tall employee lifts his short statured coworker onto a seat without her permission.[41] Across all the films, the audience is given explicit directions on when they are supposed to cringe, delivered by both onlookers' facial expressions and Brooker, who narrates his discomfort with lines like, "You can't just try sign language," "He's blind; he's not stupid," and "You can't just lift her."[42] Setting aside the lateral ableism wrapped up in the word "stupid," Brooker's reactions are obviously not

designed for a disabled audience. Most disabled people don't need it explained to them how not to be cringeworthy around disability.

My frustration with this campaign is not just that it centers a nondisabled audience but that, by centering a nondisabled audience, it becomes unclear what purpose cringing serves. Read generously, the cringe is meant to prompt introspection: the nondisabled audience watches the films, identifies with the awkward, nondisabled person, and navigates the fallout of the subsequent affective crisis by altering their future behavior to prevent further identification. But I'm not convinced that this is how cringing works. It's true that, when we cringe, our affective infrastructures are modified to safeguard against future affective crises, but the modifications are not necessarily behavioral. Often, they're more discreetly affective. Cringing teaches us with whom it is not safe to share feeling, and that lesson results first and foremost in a kind of speciation or typologizing among different kinds of people. Sometimes typologizing encourages us to change our own behavior to ensure we fit into a desirable category, but more often it convinces us that there was no identification in the first place. Cringeworthiness sticks to *them*, not us. And by sticking it to them, we protect ourselves, assuring one another that so long as we can recognize cringeworthiness, we can never be cringeworthy.

This misguided self-assurance not only diminishes the pedagogical impact of a redirected cringe aesthetic but also individuates its lesson as a matter of personal feeling. Disability rights activist Lorraine Gradwell argues that such individualizing is the primary problem with Scope's film series: "'End the Awkward' neatly ignores the pressing matters around disability such as social security, housing, and hate crime . . . treating people's attitudes to disability as if it were just a matter of good manners, when in reality it's often about blatant discrimination."[43] A redirected cringe aesthetic that relies on cringing as the sole measure of an audience's learning neglects to account for how cringing can be experienced as a cathartic relinquishment of responsibility. Instead of helping audiences to situate

themselves within networks of structural power, sometimes cringing does the opposite. Each time something is made into an object of cringe, our feelings toward it are opened up and left to oxidize as part of a chemical reaction with normativity. Once brought back under control, the affective crises that cringe generates can, counterintuitively, strengthen normativity's hold over our feelings, making it easier to forestall or prevent identification before an affective crisis begins. The easier it becomes to refuse identification, the more powerful our affective infrastructures become. The more powerful these infrastructures become, the more confidence we grow that our feelings are the right feelings and our knowledge, the right knowledge. A cringe aesthetic that doesn't challenge the status quo isn't redirected at all; it's merely initiated from a different angle.

If a cringe aesthetic is going to be effectively redirected away from disability, it must force the audience into a meaningful confrontation with the abled norms that structure their own feelings. It must take on an edge of anti-ableist criticality that slices deep into the audience's affective infrastructure to leave them gasping at the sheer overwhelm of felt intensity. I'm calling for a more thoroughly cripped cringe aesthetic that incites a cringe not only at the exposure of the audience's own prejudiced attitudes or discriminatory behaviors but also makes clear that these attitudes and behaviors are terrifying. They frighten us disabled people. I don't care whether nondisabled people cringe at themselves; I want them to feel me cringing at them, and I want them to know that my cringe emerges not from my disappointment in their failure to abide by social norms but from my horror that their feelings cause material harm. I want them to feel my feelings toward what their feelings do. I also want them to feel my cringing stick to them. I want them to feel what it's like to be made cringeworthy, not in a way that they can disavow by cringing at themselves but in a way that reveals cringeworthiness as a requisite condition of complicity with the ableism structuring our world.

*

I'll end with a final scene. This time, I'll admit upfront that it happened to me.

You're at your first faculty retreat for a new job. It's a long day of meetings, but you're excited. Nearly every faculty member in the department is present, and you're looking forward to meeting people you missed during your campus visit. Throughout the day, you shake many hands, smile many smiles, and start many pleasant conversations. Despite the drag of the day, you're feeling optimistic. It feels like people want you here.

Toward the middle of the afternoon, you grow a little overwhelmed. It's been more noise than you're used to in a single day. The overhead fluorescent lights are bright. The heavy perfume on a colleague is starting to get to you. The best solution appears to be some light stimming. You get up from your seat and move to the back of the room to avoid distracting others. Your favorite stim at the time is rocking back and forth, heel to toe, and repetitively touching your thumbs and forefingers together. It's a perfect combination because it involves full body engagement but is nearly silent and allows you to participate in conversation. Within minutes, your breathing has evened out and your muscles have relaxed. It was a good decision to get up. So good, in fact, that you decide to spend the rest of the afternoon where you are.

When the day ends, you return to your seat to gather your belongings. A colleague tugs on your sleeve. "Next time you're having a seizure, what would you like me to do?"

"I'm sorry, what?"

"Next time you're having a seizure like I saw you having earlier, should I call somebody or get you something?" The colleague is visibly concerned. "I felt so bad for you."

“I wasn’t seizing; I was stimming” You respond. “I’m autistic.”

“Oh, that’s fascinating. My nephew is on the spectrum. His parents found this incredible therapist for him, and now you wouldn’t even know he has autism.”

Your stomach drops. Your colleague is describing applied behavior analysis, a harmful clinical practice aimed at autistic children that resembles conversion therapy. It’s psychologically, sometimes also physically, tortuous. You force a weak smile.

“I could get you the therapist’s number if you want.”

“No, thanks.”

“Well, let me know if you change your mind.” They pause. “Do you want to come out for drinks tonight?”

You politely decline and take the long route home. *This fucking shit*. When you get home, you eat dinner and get ready for bed. Sitting up against your pillows, you check your inbox before turning out the lights. There’s an unread message from your colleague.

Subject line: “Just in case!”

The message: a name, a phone number, and an email address. Then, “I felt like you would change your mind.”

She felt.

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Article details

J. Logan Smilges, "Cringe Theory," *Lateral* 13.1 (2024).

https://doi.org/10.25158/L13.1.2

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Lateral is the peer-reviewed, open access journal of the Cultural Studies Association.

ISSN 2469-4053